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North America ski guide: the best resorts and deals

In the first of a new series of ski guides Gabriella Le Breton heads to the US and Canada, where top-class resorts are offering remarkable deals. Previous of Images Next The resorts that make up the Lake Tahoe ski area (including Heavenly, Squaw Valley and Kirkwood) pride themselves on keeping Tahoe blue Photo: GETTY Colorado is known for the glitz and glamour of its star resorts, including Aspen Photo: GETTY The slopes of Banff's three resorts - Lake Louise Mountain Resort, Sunshine and Mount Norquay - boast sensational views Photo: GETTY While skiing in North America might not seem very credit crunch-friendly at first glance, look closer and you'll find that it's more affordable than expected. This is largely thanks to the bigger tour operators who offer excellent-value deals including flights and transfers. And for those who do brave the transatlantic flight, America's fabled empty, wide open, tree-lined corduroy slopes await. Combine this with reliable snow, non-existent lift queues, excellent ski tuition, consistently high levels of service and dining both on and off the mountain and you'll soon forget any jet lag. Best for eco-friendly skiing

Led by the flamboyant Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, California has fully embraced sustainable politics and is pioneering ecotourism in America. Californian ski resorts are genuinely committed to minimising the environmental impact of winter sports and adhere wholeheartedly to restrictions on snowmaking, construction, trail preparation and public transport.

The tiny resort of Badger Pass in the spectacular Yosemite National Park abides by some of the strictest rules of any ski resort in the world it's only allowed to stay open for three months each winter, artificial snowmaking is banned and the resort's 10 runs have been created naturally, with no logging or clearance permitted.

The seven ski resorts that make up the Lake Tahoe ski area (including Heavenly, Squaw Valley and Kirkwood) pride themselves on keeping Tahoe blue the water in the lake is as clean as that in the lakes of Yosemite. The resorts work together with local government and businesses to achieve tough environmental goals, with successful projects including treating water run-off from car parks and offsetting CO2 emissions by purchasing renewable power units. Best for snow

On average, Utah receives over 42 feet of snow each winter, getting annual falls of nearly 58ft the past two winters. Compare these figures with the average annual snowfall in most European resorts (17-25ft) and add the fact that the snow is some of the driest, lightest, fluffiest snow in the world and you appreciate why resorts such as

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Alta, Snowbird and Brighton are the place of off-piste skiing legend.

However, there's more to Utah than steep, deep powder heaven it's home to 13 ski resorts, 11 of which are within one hour's drive of Salt Lake City, facilitating easy exploration from a cosmopolitan base. British visitor numbers to Park City increased exponentially last winter, thanks to its excellent family facilities; the luxurious Deer Valley resort rates among the most exclusive in North America; and the aptly named and highly underrated Powder Mountain is one of America's largest ski areas, offering some of the world's most affordable snowcat skiing. Best for luxury

While Colorado is home to some genuinely down-to-earth ski resorts like Telluride and Breckenridge, it is best known for the glitz and glamour of its star resorts: Aspen/Snowmass, Vail and Beaver Creek. These three 'grandes dames' of the ski world are located within about 100 miles of each other and offer virtually unparalleled levels of luxury and service in addition to world-class skiing and tuition for all levels.

In keeping with their exclusive reputations, Aspen and Vail vie for the title of 'most expensive ski pass in the world', with 'the Beav' not far behind. However, in return you can expect immaculately groomed trails, resort ambassadors to show you around the slopes, complimentary sun cream, cookies and drinks, slick, efficient lift systems and minimal queues. In resort, high-end accommodation is par for the course and gourmet restaurants, chic boutiques and trendy bars and clubs are a dime a dozen. Given the tough economic climate, resorts and operators are currently offering some remarkable deals, making this winter the best time to treat yourself to a visit to these resorts. Best for beauty

If you want to ski amid acres of raw, spectacular natural beauty, you could do worse than head for the ski resorts of Alberta. Located within Banff National Park, the slopes of Banff's three resorts Lake Louise Mountain Resort, Sunshine and Mount Norquay boast sensational views and a palpable sense of being in the heart of a wilderness. As you explore the gladed trails and dramatic backcountry bowls, you half expect an elk to step out from the forest and amble past you.

Some 200 miles north of Banff lies Jasper National Park, home to the town of Jasper and Marmot Basin ski resort. Jasper is a quirky, earthy town and with the exception of the Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge hotel, luxury is hard to find. Marmot's ski terrain is split evenly between all ski abilities and it's one of the least crowded resorts of its size in the world on weekdays on average 1,000 skiers roam the 1,675-acre ski area, meaning more than one acre of winter wonderland per skier. On 'busy' days, you'll

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have to share your acre with one other skier. Best for dedicated skiers

Kicking Horse, Big White, Fernie, Revelstoke, Red these names will send ripples of excitement through any ski fan, bringing to mind visions of long virgin powder runs, snowcat skiing, heliskiing and 'ski safari' road trips. However, for most recreational skiers, they'll mean very little, which is not so much a reflection of the lack of terrain suitable for beginner and intermediate skiers but more of the current lack of in-resort facilities when compared to other North American resorts.

The obvious exception to this rule is Whistler, which attracts more British skiers than any other resort in North America and will be hosting the Winter Olympics this winter. Whistler boasts two large mountains, Whistler and Blackcomb, which were joined by the Peak2Peak gondola last winter. Together the two mountains provide wide, rolling pistes for novices and intermediates, accessible, world-class off-piste terrain and three well-maintained snowparks. Whistler ticks all the 'ski town' boxes too a good range of accommodation, plenty of restaurants and shops, lively nightlife and good transport links to Vancouver airport.

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